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SUBJECT: BREMEN STATE ELECTION - AN END TO 12 YEARS OF A GRAND COALITION?

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: The upcoming May 13 state elections in Bremen/Bremerhaven are Germany's only state election in 2007. With 40 percent in the polls, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) is likely to be in the comfortable position of being able to choose its coalition partner. The only viable coalition options are a renewal of the SPD-led "grand coalition" with the Christian Democrats (CDU), which has governed Bremen since 1995, or the formation of a SPD-Greens or "red-green" coalition. The right-wing extremist German Peoples Union (DVU) will almost certainly retain its one seat in the Bremen Parliament. Meanwhile, the Left Party (die Linke) has a realistic chance of joining a "western" state parliament for the first time, which will be a major psychological boost for the group. Between May 2 and 9, Hamburg's Pol/Econ Off spoke with SPD, CDU, Greens and Linke representatives about their perspectives on the upcoming elections. End Summary.

The SPD Has the Lead, But With Whom Will They Dance?

¶2. (U) The May 4 ZDF Politbarometer poll showed the SPD at 40 percent (they received 42.3 in the 2003 elections), the CDU at 28 percent (29.8 in 2003), the Greens at 14 percent (12.8 in 2003), the Free Democrats (FDP) at 6.0 (4.2 in 2003), the Linke at 4.5 percent, and the far-right DVU at 4.0 (2.3 percent in 2003). While the city-state of Bremen/Bremerhaven has a five percent hurdle to enter the state parliament, parties only need to receive five percent of the vote in either Bremen or Bremerhaven. According to the May 4 poll, the current SPD mayor, Jens Boehrnsen, enjoys a significantly higher personal popularity rating than CDU lead candidate Thomas Roewekamp (54 versus 20 percent). While Bremen voters have not always been pleased with the performance of the SPD-CDU grand coalition, 54 percent favor its continuation, whereas only 37 percent prefer an SPD-Green (red-green) government (Infratest Dimap April 26 poll).

¶3. (SBU) Boehrnsen and SPD candidates have been very tight lipped on which party they will choose as coalition partners. On May 9, CDU Caucus Leader Hartmut Perschau told Hamburg's Pol/Econ Off that he believes both Boehrnsen and majorities of the Bremen SPD board and caucus strongly prefer red-green. However, Perschau thinks that there is a fifty percent chance that the SPD will opt again for a grand coalition due to the greater likelihood of getting budgetary support from the federal government if the SPD-CDU coalition stays in place. Perschau thought Boehrnsen might stand up to SPD party and caucus preferences for the good of the city, as did his predecessor

Henning Scherf, but did question whether Boehrnson had the boldness to do so.

¶4. (SBU) While not directly stating in which direction the SPD was leaning, SPD Parliamentary Manager Frank Pietrzok said that the SPD-CDU coalition increasingly lacks the programmatic and personal base for continuation. He complained that policy-making within the grand coalition had increasingly turned into horse trading and debate over administrative matters. Pietrzok stated that the programmatic commonality on educational and social issues was higher between the SPD and the Greens than within the grand coalition. However, he conceded that large-scale economic/industrial projects (e.g. dredging of the Weser river, construction of a coal power plant) would be more controversial between the SPD and the Greens. However, Greens Parliamentary Manager Felix Holefleisch indicated that such differences were not insurmountable obstacles to the formation of a red-green government and that all issues were negotiable.

Linke Ambition to Gain Foothold in Western Parliaments

¶5. (SBU) Linke Party Manager Andreas Hein pointed out that at the national and local level the Linke were eager to overcome the five percent hurdle in Bremen in order to enter a "western" German state parliament for the first time. He said that the Bremen Linke has received personnel support from Linke party associations in other German states. However, he stressed that despite this support, the party did not have enough activists for the campaign, especially to cover Bremerhaven. According to Hein, the Bremen Linke has a 150,000 Euro campaign budget drawn from public campaign support, the national Linke campaign election fund, and party fees. Party officials in Berlin have told Embassy representatives that success in Bremen would be a major boost for the party, improving its chances in big states

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due to vote in early 2008. While both Pietrzok and Holefleisch admitted that they may lose some of their voters to the Linke, the SPD and Greens have ignored the Linke in their campaigning. Both party officials stated that they have adopted this strategy in order to prevent lending the Linke legitimacy by recognizing their issues.

¶6. (SBU) COMMENT: In our conversations, not only did our SPD and Greens contacts indicate that Bremen's SPD is leaning towards a red-green coalition, but even the CDU leadership seems to think Mayor Boehrnson and his party would prefer a new governing partner. Bremen would then be the only state government in which the Greens are represented again. Nevertheless, federal considerations might prompt Boehrnson to adopt a statesmanlike attitude and continue the grand coalition, as Bremen could be more likely in receiving urgent financial support from mostly CDU-led state governments and the national government. Balancing this is the SPD's growing desire to demonstrate a strong and independent profile to voters; breaking up a grand coalition would send just that message. The other potential national message will come from the success or failure of the Linke to enter parliament. Success coupled with a strong SPD outcome in a city that tends to lean to the left could cause the SPD to look to its left in advance of next year's big state elections. Independent of coalition outcomes, Bremen will continue to face the same challenges as in the past: high unemployment (Note: Bremen's unemployment is at 13 percent and Bremerhaven's at 19 percent; both are high above the national average of 9.5 percent. End Note.), the highest per capita debt in Germany, and an unbalanced budget. END COMMENT.

¶7. (U) This message has been coordinated with Embassy Berlin.
BUTCHER